

# ALPHABETVM

## COPHTVM

### SIVE

## AEGYPTIACVM

Figura		Nomen	Potestas.
Α α	Αλφ α	Alpha	A
Β β	Βι β	Vida	V
Γ γ	Γα γ	Gamma	G
Δ δ	Δα δ	Dalda	D
Ε ε	Ει ε	Ei	E
Ϝ ϝ	Ϝο ϝο	So	S
Ζ ζ	Ζι ζ	Zida	Z
Η η	Ηι η	Hida	I
Θ θ			

☞ SPECIMENS OF COPTIC TYPE FROM THE  
SACRA CONGREGATIO  
DE PROPAGANDA FIDE IN ROME  
BY STEPHEN EMMEL\*

It is common knowledge that the discovery of the Rosetta Stone at the end of the eighteenth century provided the key to the decipherment of the ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs. It is not so commonly known that this decipherment made hieroglyphic writing understandable only because by then Coptic, the final phase of the Egyptian language, had been an object of serious study for more than a century.

When Europeans became aware of Coptic during the Renaissance, Arabic had already replaced it as the language of Egypt. But the shrinking Coptic church preserved its biblical and liturgical texts in bilingual Coptic-Arabic manuscripts, and along with them the written remnants of an unsophisticated grammatical tradition which had developed while Coptic was dying out between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries. Although there were no longer any Copts who could claim really to know their ancestral language, at least it was not yet irretrievably lost. The Beinecke Library has recently acquired a rare printed book which marked the beginning of the rescue of Coptic from this impending oblivion: *Alphabetum Cophtum sive Aegyptiacum*, a type specimen issued early in the seventeenth century by the Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide in Rome to illustrate the first font of movable Coptic type.<sup>1</sup>

The specimen bears no date. It must have been printed sometime between 1626, when the press was founded, and 14 May 1634, the date of a letter from Gilles de Loches to Nicolas Claude Fabri de Peiresc in which the specimen is discussed critically.<sup>2</sup> The idea of casting Coptic type was doubtless inspired by the Coptological activity of the Italian pilgrim Pietro della Valle. He had returned to Rome in 1626 and, among many other things, was trying to arrange for the translation and publication of a medieval Coptic-Arabic grammar and glossary which he had acquired in Egypt, hoping "that thus even this lost and dead Egyptian language of the Copts might

\* For the sake of its interest to Coptology and to the history of printing, a complete facsimile of the seventeenth-century Coptic type specimen discussed below is provided herewith at four-fifths of actual size.

be revivable to the world with notable benefit both to science, on account of its antiquity, and also to the church, on account of its being the last remaining relics of these Egyptians, most ancient Christians, who have been separated from the Roman church since a very long time ago."<sup>3</sup>

About the middle of 1629, della Valle forwarded a Coptic alphabet and syllabary to Jean Morin, the editor of the great Polyglot Bible then in preparation in Paris.<sup>4</sup> It is possible that what he gave to Morin was a copy of the Coptic type specimen, the last two pages of which do indeed display the beginning of a syllabary. But when it is considered that on 21 March 1630 della Valle could write to Morin that Coptic type "has now been cast,"<sup>5</sup> it seems clear that what he had sent to Morin the previous year was a handwritten draft of what was later published in the type specimen.<sup>6</sup> Since it is likely that the specimen would have been printed not too long after the type was cast, it is reasonable to conclude that the publication is to be dated sometime between the middle of 1629 and the end of 1630.<sup>7</sup> In any case, the *Alphabetum Cophtum* is undoubtedly one of the oldest type specimens issued by the Propaganda press, and possibly the oldest.<sup>8</sup>

The *Alphabetum Cophtum*, printed in octavo, is eight pages long.<sup>9</sup> The title, "The Coptic, or Egyptian, Alphabet," appears on the first page. Beginning beneath the title, the first three pages display, in columns, the letters of the Coptic alphabet (Bohairic dialect) in two or three forms (capital and ordinary), the names of the letters in Coptic and in an Italian representation, and a sort of transliteration of each letter indicating its pronunciation. The fourth page is headed, "Exposition of some of the letters of this alphabet," introducing two pages on which sixteen of the letters are singled out for special comment, mostly concerning pronunciation (occasionally drawing parallels from Greek, Hebrew, Arabic, and Spanish), but once concerning graphic representation. This section concludes with the statement, "The remaining letters are pronounced as in the Greek alphabet." The sixth page presents the Bohairic Coptic version of Psalm 46:1-5 (45:2-6 LXX). The text is transcribed relatively exactly, considering that it was incomprehensible to the transcriber.<sup>10</sup> The seventh page is headed, "Syllabary," and introduces a systematic combination of every vowel with every consonant, with an interlinear transliteration.<sup>11</sup> By the end of the eighth page, we have reached only as far as "ma me mi mi mo mu mo" and mercifully the page concludes with, "And so on."

Phi	F.
Chi	Ch
Ebf	Pf
O	O
Scei	Sc
Fei	F
Chei	Ch
Hori	H
Giangia	Gi
Scima	Sc
Dei	Di

Th	T	S	R	P	O	X	N	M	L	K	I	Th
He	Dau	Sima	Ro	Bi	O	Exi	Ni	Mi	Laula	Kabba	Iaуда	

YALE

*Declaratio aliquarum litterarum  
huius Alphabeti.*

**B.** Vida, u consonans pronuntia-  
tur vt β, Vita Græcum.

**H.** Hida, fmilis litteræ Græcæ, η,  
Ita, i, longum, pronuntiat ut,  
i, declinans ad, e; sed quando  
inuenitur cum accentu defuper,  
it, pronuntiat ut, i, clarum.

**N** N, Ni, in fine dictionis mutat  
formam, & scribitur sic J,

**Θ**, Thida, vt, θ, Thita Græcum.

**Π**, Bi, cum fit p, apud Græcos, pro-  
nuntiat ut, b.

**T**, Dau, cum fit, T, apud Græ-  
cos, pronuntiat ut, d.

**Υ**, He, profertur aliquando ut i,  
& y, & post Alpha est v, vocalis.

**Φ**, Phi,

**Φ**, Phi, aliquando p, declinans  
ad, b,

**Χ**, Chi absque aspiratione.

**Ψ**, Ebsi, cum fit apud Græcos, ps,  
pronuntiat ut, b.

**Ω**, Scei, sc, pronuntiat ut w,  
scin hebreum, vel ש, scin, Arab.

**Ϸ**, Chei, ch, cum aspiratione, vt n,  
chet Heb. vel צ, cha, Arab.

**Ζ**, Hori, h, vt n, he, Heb. vel Ϸ,  
he, Arab.

**Ξ**, Giangia, profertur, vt, j, jota  
Hispan. vt hjo.

**Σ**, Scima, sc, in pronuntiatione est  
fmilis superioris litteræ cy, scei.

**†**, Dei, creditur n, thau Heb. sed  
à Cophitis pronuntiat ut Di.

Reliquæ litteræ pronuntiantur, vt  
in Alphab. Græco.

The first book to be published using the new font was an Egyptological work by the Jesuit scholar Athanasius Kircher which included some observations on Coptic grammar based on his study of della Valle's Coptic-Arabic grammatical manuscript.<sup>12</sup> This publication was followed in 1643 by another book, which included an edition of della Valle's manuscript.<sup>13</sup> For the first time, orientalist were able to learn more about Coptic than what its alphabet looked like and how it was pronounced by modern Copts.<sup>14</sup> The study of Coptic has advanced so far since the seventeenth century that the medieval grammatical descriptions now seem very out-of-date. But it was they that set in motion the evolution of the modern understanding of Coptic, and hence of Egyptian as a whole.

When the type and casting matrices of the Propaganda press were carried off to enrich France at the end of the eighteenth century,<sup>15</sup> it seems that the Coptic font was not spared. New Coptic type, identical in basic design but smaller in size, had to be cut early in the nineteenth century for the publication of Georg Zoega's catalogue of the Coptic manuscripts in the collection of Cardinal Stephano Borgia.<sup>16</sup> A new type specimen was issued.<sup>17</sup> The Yale Library has owned a copy of this later specimen for many years; it has now been transferred to the Beinecke Library. Except for the size of the type, and hence the distribution of the matter on the pages, it is virtually identical to the earlier specimen, from which it clearly was copied.<sup>18</sup> It is regrettable that this specimen shows no trace of the great progress that had been made in the study of Coptic during the two centuries since the first specimen was published. In fact, the reduction of the type size has resulted in an exaggeration of the erroneous word division in the first edition of the Psalm text, with the result that the text looks more like gibberish now than it did when it really was incomprehensible. The Coptologist's regret is assuaged by the knowledge that Zoega's book, printed so attractively in the new font, was another of the great landmarks in the history of the rescue of Egyptian from oblivion.

1. Neither the publisher nor the place of publication (nor the date) is recorded on the specimen, but there can be no doubt that it was the work of the Propaganda press. In addition to its conformity with other known specimens published by this press, there is also the evidence of its regular inclusion in subsequent catalogues of the press's publications. An extensive but still not complete list of type specimens issued by the Propaganda press is available in *Catalogue of Typefounders' Specimens* . . . (London: Birrell & Garnett, 1928; repr. 1972), pp. 4-9 (nos. 3-25); hereafter cited as B&G. Perhaps more complete is E. J. Brill Catalogue 524 (*Philologia Orientalis* 2); I have not been able to consult this catalogue.

2. Étienne Quatremère, *Recherches critiques et historiques sur la langue et la littérature de l'Égypte* (Paris, 1808), pp. 56–57; cf. Francis W. Gravit, "Peiresc et les études coptes en France au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle," *Bulletin de la Société d'archéologie copte* 4 (1938): 17–18 (being wary that there are some apparent misprints in the dates Gravit gives).

3. Pietro della Valle, *Viaggi di Pietro della Valle il pellegrino* (Brighton, 1843), vol. 1, p. 208 (Letter XI.9), my translation; Gravit, "Peiresc et les études coptes," pp. 2–5.

4. Richard Simon, *Antiquitates ecclesiae orientalis* (London, 1682), pp. 156–57, Morin to della Valle, 14 September 1629: *Menses aliquot jam elapsi sunt cum R. Pater Bertinus Alphabetum Aegyptiacum ad me misit quod delineaveras. . . . Alphabeti tui ope adjutus nihil amplius me a literarum cognitione & syllabarum compositione retardat.*

5. Simon, *Antiquitates*, p. 167: *characteres enim Aegyptiaci superius memoratae Congregationis [de propaganda fide] jussu, jam sunt efformati*; the last three words are omitted in Gravit, "Peiresc et les études coptes," p. 5.

6. While in Egypt, della Valle had already written out a similar depiction of the Coptic alphabet, indicating the pronunciation and numerical value of each letter, presumably based on interviews with Copts who preserved the scant traditional knowledge of their ancestral tongue. See della Valle, *Viaggi*, vol. 1, p. 237 (Letter XI.14).

7. It is worth noting that 1629 was the date of the specimen's publication given by Jacques Le Long, *Bibliotheca sacra in binos syllabos distincta . . .* (Paris, 1723), p. 1195, though on what grounds he did not say.

8. The oldest dated specimen is B&G, no. 3, from 1629; also possibly older than the Coptic specimen are B&G, nos. 4, 5, 8, 11, and perhaps one or two of the specimens alluded to by Daniel Berkeley Updike, *Printing Types* (Cambridge, Mass., 1922), vol. 1, p. 135 (who refers to Giovanni Amaduzzi, *Catalogus librorum qui ex Typographico Sacrae Congregationis de Propaganda Fide variis linguis prodierunt . . .* [Rome: Congregatio de Propaganda Fide, 1773], which I have not been able to consult).

9. The pages are not numbered or otherwise marked; catchwords occur on pp. 1–3 and 5. When acquired, the specimen was a single folded sheet, unbound and uncut.

10. There is only one systematic error in the transcription: *phi* is consistently misread as *psi*, accounting for about half of the errors in the text.

11. The combinations with *gamma* are omitted entirely, and *xi* is erroneously used where *zeta* was intended.

12. Athanasius Kircher, *Prodromus coptus sive aegyptiacus . . .* (Rome: Congregatio de Propaganda Fide, 1636).

13. Athanasius Kircher, *Lingua aegyptiaca restituta* (Rome: Hermann Scheus, 1643).

14. Prior to the work of the Propaganda press, there were three printed books from which a diligent reader might have gleaned some notion of the Coptic alphabet. The first was Guillaume Postel, *Linguarum duodecim characteribus differentium alphabetum . . .* (Paris, 1538). The second was Teseo Ambrogio, *Introductio in chaldaicam linguam . . .* (Pavia, 1539), on which see Eberhard Nestle, "Aus einem sprachwissenschaftlichen Werk von 1539," *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 58 (1904): 601–16. The third was Pierre Victor Palma Cayet, *Paradigmata de quatuor linguis orientalibus praecipuis, arabica, armena, syra, aethiopica* (Paris, 1596), on which see Quatremère, *Recherches*, p. 294, and Angelo de Gubernatis, *Materiaux pour servir à l'histoire des études orientales en Italie* (Paris, 1876), p. 260 n. 1. I have not been able to consult Cayet's book.

15. Updike, *Printing Types*, vol. 1, p. 183.

16. Georg Zoega, *Catalogus codicum copticorum manu scriptorum qui in museo Borgiano Velitris adservantur* (Rome: Congregatio de Propaganda Fide, 1810).

17. B&G, no. 25. This specimen is also undated. Birrell and Garnett rightly dated it "after 1800," but it is also safe to say that it was published before 1805. Certainly the type existed by this date, for it was used to print Zoega's catalogue, which had

Ψαλαριον αε.

ΠΕΝΗΟΥΤΠΕΠΕΝ

ααα ψωτπειπεναα //

Πενβονθονε γεννηενλτψι

σεττρεεεπενεααα //

Ευβε ψαμινερερτ ε εγγω

ιαα γαγγωρ τερινεπκαε //

Ορογιτοροδι τεβηχεντω

υε ε γεννηεντητεμιαααα //

δωγωροεαααωρ τερινεπ

ααα // δρεωωρ τερινεπτω

οι Γεννηεαααα //

Νιοροιντεψαροεωρονικαα

ψτορνοα // δατορβιαετ

γααααααααααααααα //

Οροε ψτine γκιαα γεντεε

ααα // Ερερβονηενεεεε

ινεψτ //

SYL-

SYLLABARIUM.

αβ εβ ηβ ιβ οβ ρβ ωβ  
ab eb ib ob ub ob

βα βε βη βι βο βρ βω  
ba be bi bo bu bo

αδ εδ ηδ ιδ οδ ρδ ωδ  
ad ed id od ud od

αδ εδ ηδ ιδ οδ ρδ ωδ  
da de di do du do

αζ εζ ηζ ιζ οζ ρζ ωζ  
az ez iz oz uz oz

αζ εζ ηζ ιζ οζ ρζ ωζ  
za ze zi zo zu zo

αθ εθ ηθ ιθ οθ ρθ ωθ  
ath eth ith oth uth orh



already been set in type by the beginning of 1805 (Zoega, *Catalogus*, p. vi n.; cf. Quatremère, *Recherches*, pp. 107-8).

18. A new mistake is introduced into the Psalm text as the result of misreading two ligatured letters in the first specimen.

